FAQ for certified businesses regarding COVID-19

VERSION 4

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ENGLISH

FAQ – in relation to IFS measures taken in light of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis

Dear IFS User,

Due to the uncertainty we have all experienced over this period, IFS would like to provide some answers to questions you may have relating to IFS Standards / Programs and the newly developed tools, i.e. the IFS Remote Surveillance Check and the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check. We hope to bring some clarity to your daily work this way.

Associated documents to these FAQs are as follows

- IFS Newsletter Remote Surveillance Check March 31st, 2020
- IFS Newsletter – Update Coronavirus March 26th 2020
- IFS Remote Surveillance Check Guidance version 2, April 2020
- IFS GMP Check Guidance, version 1, April 2020
- IFS Guidance on crisis management concerning the COVID-19 crisis

Please note: whenever there is a mention of an IFS Audit, the same applies to the IFS Global Market Assessments for chapter 1 and 2

1 IFS Certification Audit

1.1 When and where is it possible to perform IFS Certification Audits?

IFS Certification Audits are possible if there are no precautionary measures taken to restrict these by either local governments, your own site or the responsible certification bodies. Your organization and the concerned certification body should conduct a risk assessment that justifies the feasibility of the audit.

1.2 Does IFS care about the health of company employees and auditors?

The health of all involved audit participants has the highest priority for IFS and its stakeholders. All governmental recommendations or regulations, as well as the protection of employees and auditors must be taken into account in the risk assessment when deciding whether an audit can be conducted.

1.3   How can you determine if an audit needs to be postponed due to the Coronavirus crisis situation and who needs to be informed?

IFS recommends that all sites carry out a risk assessment and consider whether external persons should be allowed access to the facility. It means that every site should do an individual risk assessment considering the health risk and governmental measures to decide if a specific audit can be conducted or not. If the conclusion is that a third party audit is not possible during the time of this crisis, then the responsible certification body should be informed with immediate effect and the audit should be postponed.

All certification bodies are able to explain such a postponement in the IFS Database by ticking the new checkbox "postponement due to the Coronavirus crisis".

As soon as a new audit is planned, the respective date should be included in the IFS Database via your certification body, in order to make it transparent to your business partners on short notice.

Please note: The audit shall be postponed to the earliest possible date. After the lift of governmental restrictions, the justification about the postponement of the audit shall be challenged by the CB.   **added**

1.4   We want to conduct an IFS Certification Audit but our certification body does not. What can we do?

In the event that the certification body's risk assessment concludes not to conduct the audit during the necessary timeframe, the site has to accept this. Arguments for the decision need to be clearly communicated between both parties as it might be required for communication with the site´s customers.

1.5   What do we do if the IFS Certification Audit cannot be conducted?

IFS strongly recommends that companies get in contact with their customers to provide them with the necessary information regarding their particular situation and the governmental measures regarding COVID-19 in their regions. Moreover, companies should get in in contact with their certification body for further actions, such as the database notification (as explained in Point 1.3).

1.6   Why does IFS not extend the IFS Certificate without conducting an on-site audit?

An accredited certificate according to a process and product standard stands for a detailed examination on-site and therefore justifies a high level of trust. Extending a certificate without the products and processes being checked on-site is not possible from an IFS point of view.

As a consequence, existing IFS Certificates remain valid until the end of their term and will then lose their regular validity if an audit was not conducted as required and scheduled.

During this time of crisis, an expiring certificate neither means that the certificate has been suspended or withdrawn nor that the requirements of the IFS Standards are not fulfilled anymore – it only means that an on-site renewal audit was not possible in due time.

Also, there are no penalties if IFS Certificates are not renewed in time.

1.7   Does IFS offer the option of a remote IFS Certification Audit?

Within the IFS Process and Product Certification, an on-site evaluation of the site and the relevant production processes is mandatory. A full remote IFS Certification Audit cannot provide sufficient input to evaluate all IFS Standard Requirements by using all necessary / relevant audit techniques. **Therefore, fully remote IFS Certification Audits are currently only possible for IFS Broker.**

Click here for more details regarding the IFS Broker remote auditing option.

1.8   How can I communicate to my customers that the IFS Certification Audit cannot take place and the certificate will expire?

IFS's recommendation is to get in contact with your customers and explain the situation. Moreover, please get in contact with your certification body and ask them to make use of the recently introduced tick box in the IFS Database including the comment field. By ticking this box, you can demonstrate to all IFS Database Users that a planned audit had to be postponed because of the Coronavirus crisis. In addition to the tickbox, IFS highly recommends finding an agreement with the certification body on a statement for the comment field, pointing out the following:

- reason for the postponement
- recent status of production
- additional measures taken by the site to ensure safety and quality of products (e.g. internal audits, employee trainings/instructions)
- additional surveillance measures taken by the certification body
- next steps in audit planning

The comment field can also be used for any additional explanation, e.g. in case of further postponement.

As soon as a new audit is planned, the date should be included in the IFS Database via your certification body, in order to make it transparent to your business partners on short notice.

If an audit is finally performed again after the certificate is expired and if this audit is failed, the CB shall mention the reason of failure in the comment field.

All IFS Database Users who have marked you as a favourite receive a notification with the information entered in the comment field. IFS recommends using this tool in order to support the companies in their communication with their business partners and other customers.

1.9 What can I expect from my customers once my certificate is no longer valid?

Business partners mostly monitor the developments and have no intention of terminating existing contracts because of this exceptional situation.

In conversation with our retail partners, they have indicated that the supply of food to the population is the highest priority and that it is not in their interest to discontinue relations with suppliers even if their IFS certificate expires. They understand and share the position of IFS not to prolong or issue certificates to producing companies without an on-site check by an auditor.

IFS is aware that IFS Certification is often a condition in supplier contracts. To avoid negative consequences for those suppliers who are affected by this exceptional situation, IFS strongly recommends that both parties (retailers and their suppliers) get in touch with each other and find bilateral solutions so that contracts can be maintained.

1.10 Can I not just wait until access restrictions are lifted to receive a physical on-site IFS Certification Audit?

Yes, you can wait until current restrictions are lifted and a full IFS Certification Audit (on-site) is possible. During the time where you do not have a valid certificate, we recommend to be in close communication with your business partners. The IFS Remote Surveillance Check and the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Checks are **voluntary** tools which can be used in the meantime to provide trust between business partners in the supply chain during this crisis situation. These are stand-alone tools. Results cannot be taken into account for present and/or future IFS Certification Audits and IFS Global Markets assessments.

1.11 How long will expired certificates due to Coronavirus crisis remain visible within the IFS Database?

Only where the responsible certification body ticked the box "postponed due to the Coronavirus Crisis" will expired certificates remain visible for twelve (12) months after the expiration date of the certificate or until a new certificate is uploaded.

1.12 What is the deadline for information to be added to the IFS Database, if an IFS Audit could not be carried out due to the Coronavirus crisis?

The tick-box "postponed due to the Coronavirus crisis" can be ticked up to three (3) months after the certificate expired. If this is not done, the site will no longer be visible in the search function of the IFS Database. Nevertheless, IFS strongly recommends that the information is added as soon as it is clear that the renewal audit cannot be carried out.

Note: Additional information can still be added after activation of the tick box for Coronavirus crisis information. All companies which marked the site as a favourite, will receive a notification if the information is edited.

1.13 How should cases be handled where an audit is carried out, but some production lines are not operating?

Please note that if no exceptional rules have been communicated by IFS relating to a specific topic, then the normative standard rules always apply. Therefore, in this case of production lines not running during the audit, an extension audit will need to be performed at a later stage when the lines are running again (see e.g. IFS Food Doctrine, 1.3.4.3).

1.14 Is it possible to switch from the unannounced audit to the announced option for the Certification Audit?

If you want to switch from the unannounced to announced option due to the Coronavirus situation, the registration in the IFS Database will expire. You have to inform your customer about this change immediately. There is no need for further actions. The IFS Food Safety Check, which is organized by the IFS and could be done after the crisis, might be a good alternative.

For more information, please visit the IFS website.

If you would like to postpone the audit and go through a complete unannounced audit after the Coronavirus crisis, the certification body can let the current registration expire. As soon as audits are possible again, the certification body can use "option 2" to set up a new unannounced audit registration.

1.15 What shall a broker do if his suppliers do not have certificates anymore?

We propose to get in contact with the customer to agree on exceptions regarding the certification status of suppliers and to agree on actions and processes to provide trust in the supply chain during this extraordinary situation. IFS Remote Surveillance Checks could be an option for suppliers here.

1.16 What shall I do if a supplier of the outsourced processes no longer has a certificate?

Please note that if no exceptional rules have been communicated by IFS related to a specific topic, then the normative standard rules always apply. Therefore, in this case of non-certified supplier, other conditions need to be accepted by your customer or the food safety and quality management system for outsourced process(es) and/or products must be assessed during the audit. (see e.g. IFS Food Doctrine, 1.4.2.1).

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check and the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Checks are voluntary tools which can be used in the meantime to provide trust between business partners in the supply chain during this crisis situation.

1.17 Can an IFS Food Safety Check be performed during the Coronavirus crisis?

We would like to clarify the position of IFS relating to the feasibility of Food Safety Check activities during the Coronavirus crisis.

All IFS Auditors working within the IFS Food Safety Check program are fully aware of their professional responsibility and are experts for personnel hygiene and GMP. There is no "higher" risk originating from IFS Food Safety Check auditors for Coronavirus contamination than from any other external company like a cleaning service provider, pest control, maintenance etc. Furthermore, the risk could also be considered as similar to the risk originating from employees.

From an IFS perspective, an IFS Food Safety Check can still be conducted as long as there are no authority restrictions in relation to travel activities or access to food manufacturing facilities.

But we kindly ask you to inform us immediately if your company has defined any access restrictions for auditors, with the result that the Food Safety Check cannot be performed any longer.

In general, in case of changes for block-out periods, where the IFS Food Safety Check cannot take place (e.g. days where other certification procedures are taking place in your company, production downtime due to maintenance/ repair/ measures in pest control/ force majeure), IFS has to be informed asap via email: **safetychecks@ifs-certification.com**

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1.18 What will happen when the Food Safety Check is not performed due to the Coronavirus crisis within the validity of the current IFS Certificate?

In this case, the FSC registration will be transferred to your next IFS Certificate and the next Food Safety Check can only be performed when the new certificate is uploaded in the IFS Database. Additionally, you should inform your customers about the fact that you will not have an IFS Food Safety Check for your currently valid IFS Certificate.

1.19   What is recommended if external contractors (e.g. pest control, equipment maintenance, calibration) are not allowed to enter the site?

The company is responsible for reviewing its processes to ensure the continued production of safe products. This applies at all times.

In the event that on-site visits are not possible, additional monitoring and controls as well as specialist advice and actions should be considered.

For services which are conducted by/on behalf of the responsible authorities, the official authorities shall be contacted for further actions.

1.20   What can I do if it is not possible for internal audits <u>and/or internal trainings</u> to be conducted as planned on-site?

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The company <u>shall</u> conduct a risk assessment to allocate which parts can be conducted remotely and which parts require on-site presence.

Internal audits can be conducted on a partly remote basis due to work place and travel restrictions via the exchange of documents using online technology including interviews. They could be postponed due to staff availability but this shall be documented transparently (including reason and new planned date).

Internal trainings shall take place and are of fundamental importance. In case this is not possible as a face-to-face training, alternative solutions (online seminar, or paper version plus questionnaire, etc.) shall be considered.

| added

1.21   What is recommended if there is a lack in external laboratory capacities?

In general, the company needs to ensure that food safety and product quality provisions are not compromised and that compliance with the IFS Standard is still maintained.

In case of a lack of laboratory services, an emergency **service provider** shall be defined and approved. If still no service is available, the company needs to assess the risk and evaluate the situation. For legally requested analyses the official authorities shall be contacted for further actions.

| changed

1.22   What happens if a site is not able to complete all requirements in time for the IFS Audit as they usually do in case of normal operations (e.g. traceability exercises, management review etc.)?

All requirements shall be checked by the auditor as always and need to be fulfilled at all times.

1.23 **How will the IFS Food KO requirement 4.2.2.1. be assessed if the auditor finds out during an audit that some ingredients/ suppliers have not been used as agreed with a retailer?**

All requirements shall be fulfilled – if for any reason there was a change of supplier or even an ingredient, this had to be agreed with the retailer on a bilateral basis before the change took place.

1.24 **Is it necessary to adjust the Product/Food Safety and Quality Management System due to the COVID-19 crisis impact?**

There is currently no evidence of virus transmission via food or food packaging, nevertheless, there is evidence that it can remain viable on some surfaces for longer. Well-established food handling procedures should be sufficient to combat COVID-19, as long as physical distancing and other measures are followed. Now is the time to reassess Quality and Food Safety Systems and mitigate potential new and increased risks and reinforce compliance with IFS requirements. The protocol shall be reviewed <u>continuously</u> according to potentially increased risks, updated crisis information and data. All new relevant, legal and governmental COVID-19 crisis statements need to be taken into consideration; including retailers, industry and client requirements.

This may affect IFS areas such as HACCP analysis, personal hygiene, Product/Food Fraud and Food Defence, but is not limited to these. The ongoing review of the Product/Food Safety and Quality Management System needs to cover and reflect this.

In return, stakeholders shall be updated on all relevant information that affects your Product/Food Safety, and Quality Management Systems will maintain ongoing operations and business continuity.

1.25 **Is it possible to get back to the previous certification cycle after having ticked the corona tick box on the database?**

added

Yes, it is possible to move back to the original certification cycle as this might have been chosen on purpose.

An interruption of the audit cycle or a shorter certification validity can be the result of this choice. This possibility should be discussed with your certification body and your business partners for clarification.

Audits done before 30.06.2021 can be performed under IFS Food v6.1.

2 IFS Remote Surveillance Check

2.1 Do I need to do the Remote Surveillance Check and is it equal to an IFS Audit?

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check is a stand-alone solution that is especially developed for this crisis situation. It is voluntary, not accredited, and its result will neither lead to a certification nor can be taken into account for future IFS Certification Audits based on ISO/IEC 17065:2012 or future IFS GM Food assessments. After the Coronavirus crisis, this tool will no longer be available.

2.2 What are prerequisites for conducting the IFS Remote Surveillance Check?

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check can only be applied for sites which are already IFS certified or IFS Global Markets assessed and where a scheduled IFS Renewal Audit (or assessment) was not possible due to the Coronavirus crisis.

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check is always site specific (COID). The certification body that issued the last certificate should preferably conduct the Remote Surveillance Check, as they are already familiar with the company and managing processes. However, in the case of a change of CB by the company, the check can also be conducted by the new certification body.

It shall be conducted using suitable internet and remote technology.

2.3 Is an IFS Remote Surveillance Check possible at a site where there is no production?

No, in case a production site has fully stopped their operations (no production), an IFS Remote Surveillance Check cannot be conducted. The intention of an IFS Remote Surveillance Check is to evaluate whether the supporting management procedures and production processes during active production are still in line with IFS Requirements. So in case there is no production, recent records of production cannot be checked. However, in case an organization completely shuts down their operation and there is still a valid certification in place, the responsible certification body shall be notified.

2.4 How soon after the announcement of a "non-possible" audit in the IFS Database should the IFS Remote Surveillance Check take place?

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check can be conducted as soon as a company decides to choose this option. A suitable date needs to be agreed with the responsible certification body.

2.5 **If a company decides to have a voluntary IFS Remote Surveillance Check and, after the Coronavirus crisis, a voluntary unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check; when does the certification cycle start again?**

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check and the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check are voluntary tools provided by IFS. There is no direct link between these tools and IFS Certification or IFS GM assessment. The letter "Result of GMP Check" will have six (6) months validity, therefore IFS recommends to finish a new IFS Certification / Assessment as soon as possible but within six (6) months after the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check.

2.6 **When does a site need to get certified again?**

Certification can be requested as soon as the end of the crisis is announced by the various governments or a site decides together with the responsible certification body that an IFS Audit is possible again.

This decision should be taken in close communication with relevant business partners.

2.7 **What is the status of an already conducted head office audit within the IFS Remote Surveillance Check?**

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check is a stand-alone tool which has a different approach as a regular head office audit. Therefore, it is not possible to consider findings from the head office audit for the IFS Remote Surveillance Check.

2.8 **What is the length of an IFS Remote Surveillance Check and does it need to be conducted in one day?**

Depending on the company's size and complexity in regards to products, processes and/or technologies, the duration of the Remote Surveillance Check can vary, but shall be a minimum of five (5) hours and shall not exceed eight (8) hours.

The maximum of eight (8) hours can be split into a maximum of two (2) consecutive days.

It needs to be taken into consideration that in certain cases more time may be needed to present documents by remote techniques (e.g. switching of pages, returning to previous documents for cross checks, internet connection, etc.).

2.9 **Will there be additional unplanned costs relating to the new voluntary IFS tools?**

The costs for conducting the IFS Remote Surveillance Check and / or the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check need to be negotiated with your certification body.

2.10   As understood, the scope shall be taken from the last IFS Certificate. What happens if during the crisis the production is limited and certain product groups are not produced? Is it possible to limit the scope wording on the IFS Letter to the actual operation or should it remain the scope from the last IFS Certificate?

For the letter "Result of Remote Surveillance Check", the scope of the previous certificate shall be used. In case the company states that certain products / product groups are no longer manufactured at all, the certification body shall adjust the scope. If certain products / product groups are only temporarily not manufactured, these may stay in scope (similar to extension audit for certain products during recertification). During an IFS Remote Surveillance Check, no extension to the scope can be made.

2.11   Does the level conducted in IFS Global Markets need to be mentioned on the resulting letter?

Yes, the level conducted shall be written clearly in the letter "Result of Remote Surveillance Check".

2.12   Is it possible to perform and upload a second Remote Surveillance Check?   **added**

Yes, it is possible to conduct a second Remote Surveillance Check when the situation in specific region is still critical due to Covid-19 restrictions and an on-site audit cannot be performed.

The comment field shall also be used for additional explanation, e.g. in case of further postponement.

2.13   What happens if a Remote Surveillance Check is failed?   **added**

If the Remote Surveillance Check is failed, the CB shall mention the reason of failure in the comment field.

All IFS Database Users who have marked you as a favourite receive a notification with the information entered in the comment field. IFS recommends using this tool in order to support the companies in their communication with their business partners and other customers.

2.14   Is it possible to continue with the IFS Remote Surveillance Checks after the Coronavirus crisis has ended?

The IFS Remote Surveillance Check is a stand-alone solution that is especially developed for this crisis situation. It is not accredited, and its result will neither lead to a certification nor can it be taken into account for future IFS Certification Audits based on ISO/IEC 17065:2012 or future IFS GM Food assessments. After the Coronavirus crisis, this tool will no longer be available.

2.15   Who is allowed to see the documents in the IFS Database?

The certification body that conducted the main audit as well as the newly responsible certification body (if selected) have access to all documents. Only the certification body that uploaded the check is able to edit the information. All other IFS Database Users can only see the information that the check has been performed and are able to download the result letter in the field "Remote Surveillance Check". Companies who marked the supplier as a favourite will receive a notification when the Remote Surveillance Check has been uploaded and/or edited. The company can distribute information concerning their own site to other parties.

3   Unannounced IFS GMP on-site Checks

3.1   Can we do the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check directly after the Coronavirus crisis restriction has been lifted without having previously performed the IFS Remote Surveillance Check?

Yes, the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check will be possible for already IFS Certified Sites, independent of having conducted the IFS Remote Surveillance Check previously. The unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check will be a one (1) day unannounced on-site check, to check whether a site complies with IFS requirements relating to GMP in general and in particular with requirements for implementing HACCP as well as pest control processes. It is not accredited and no certificate will be issued. The results of the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check cannot be taken into account for future IFS Certification Audits.

3.2   A site has seasonal production, what do you recommend to do if there is no production when the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check is due?

See the IFS GMP Check Guidance for further information

3.3   Will the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check also be possible for IFS Global Markets – Food assessed sites?

Contrary to the announcement in the English IFS newsletter from March 31st 2020, an unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check is not applicable for IFS Global Markets assessed sites. A full IFS Global Markets assessment covers all relevant requirements and already has in general a duration of one (1) day maximum.

3.4 **Can a company continue with the unannounced IFS GMP on-site Checks after the Coronavirus crisis has ended?**

The unannounced IFS GMP on-site Check is a stand-alone solution that is especially developed for this crisis situation and the immediate time thereafter, when travel restrictions have been initially lifted. It is voluntary, not accredited and its result will neither lead to a certification nor can be taken into account for future IFS Certification Audits based on ISO/IEC 17065:2012 or future IFS GM Food assessments.